61

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638

THE SOUL OF INDIA

BY

SAROJINI NAIDU

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166

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Mahatma Gandhi

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WITH A FOREWORD BY

Mrs. Sarojini Naidu

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The Soul of India

BY

SAROJINI NAIDU

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THE SOUL OF INDIA

I

Coeval with earth's oldest empires which are now no more than shadowy myths and memories, and yet contemporary with the youngest world republics in the anguish of their struggle for liberty, India stands supreme amid the marvels of historic survival, and unique among the miracles of historic paradox.

For her earliest record reaching back to periods so remote as to be legendary, holds in a fine perfection of achievement those living principles of national freedom and international federation which we are wont to consider the monopoly of our modern age.

Incomparable too and sublime in its austere, heiratic splendour is the tale of her spiritual

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evolution which, through all the tumult and suffering of centuries of foreign invasion and domination has kept the inmost Soul of India inaccessible and unconquered, endowed with a perennial vitality and an unmeasured power of ultimate self-renewal, able and ready after each dark epoch of political tribulation to fulfil the prophecy of her own Shri Krishna, and "be born again and again for the establishing of the national righteousness."

To-day, She—the Immutable, the Immemorial—endures once more the poignant travail of her destined renascence, and her imminent *To-morrow* can seek no lovelier inspiration than the chronicle of her immortal *Yesterday*, which offers an ideal so comprehensive and complete in the far-famed efficiency of her elaborate civil and military organisations, her commercial enterprise, her economic prosperity, her matchless learning and her majestic art.

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Her old village democracies, self-governing and self-contained, were the living units of an immense Imperial commonwealth ; her ancient academies and universities were the living temples of the national culture and the national consciousness ; her caravan-ways and her sea-ways conveyed to the furthest kingdoms of man not only the precious treasure of her sumptuous merchandise, but the priceless riches of her resplendent thought.

Her civic life was conserved and sustained by that wondrous and versatile caste-system which, now so bitter a source of strife and disunion, represented in that stately era a true division of labour : separate social guilds for united patriotic service. Her priests and her poets were the interpreters and guardians of her transcendent wisdom ; her warriors kept alive the tradition of her chivalry and valour as keen and dazzling as their swords ; her

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tillers and her traders, her industrial and her pastoral people were all alike the custodians of the national welfare and the national wealth.

And—highest proof of a country's civilization—her womanhood enjoyed a freedom and franchise unknown in the modern world. For the woman of Ancient India had her lofty and legitimate place and function in the daily life of her race. Not only was it her sweet privilege to tend the hearth-fires and sacrificial fires in the happy and narrow seclusion of her home, but wide as humanity itself were the opportunities and occasions of her compassionate service, her intellectual triumphs and her saintly renunciations. Her agile and brilliant mind had access to the most intricate sciences and occult philosophies. Not seldom in her capacity as queen, regnant or regent, was she called upon to prove the subtlety and sagacity, the breadth and daring of her state-craft.

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And age after age, she vindicated the fidelity and fortitude, the courage and devotion of her love, on the funeral pyre which was so often the crucible of her purity, on the battlefield which was so frequently the altar of her heroism in defence of the Indian Honour of which she was at once the symbol and the shrine.

Shall not the heirs of such illustrious ideals be justified in their belief that in their splendid past lie the promise and guarantee of a splendid future? For, as a great modern thinker has said "*Not in possessions but in ideals are to be found the seeds of immortality.*"

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II

The idea of a world-allegiance to a suzerain authority is among the primal dreams of empire. It is foreshadowed in the *Ashvamedha* or quinquennial horse-sacrifice of the Mahabharata. It persists through the changing centuries—a changeless and haunting vision—and flowers, a strange and luminous blossom of spiritual ecstacy in the reign of Ashoka, whose world-wide embassies however were religious rather than political missions to spread afar the Gospel of the Buddha and not to enhance his own temporal glory or territorial power.

And it is the time of Jelal-ud-din Akbar, the Moghul Emperor that first defines and fulfils the central dream and central demand of modern Indian Nationalism of "*the Hindu Moslem unity and a liberal measure of self-*

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government under foreign rule." So full, so free, and magnificent was the gift of Akbar's superb statesmanship that it survives, not enclosed in the dusty archives of Time, but enshrined in the living folk-song of the people, a beneficent and abiding reality. There is an old folk-song that commemorates the bridals of Akbar's heir with the daughter of a royal Rajput house ; and the bride's father says with a touching humility which is the very essence of invincible pride :—

> "*My daughter within thy house shall be a slave and all my kinsfolk thy bondsmen*"

and Akbar replies

> "*Nay, thy daughter within my house shall be a queen and all thy kinsfolk my sirdars.*"

These exquisite lines lose in translation all their appealing sweetness but none of their

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deep significance, and serve to express unconsciously, but how perfectly the very soul of that unrivalled political wisdom which built its empire on the spontaneous love of a conquered people by a gracious and magnanimous identification of the alien and indigenous interests and aspirations, and by admitting the subject-race into an equal and generous partnership as common trustees of the national weal.

The paramount powers of administration were entrusted by this Muslim sovereign to his Hindu ministers, comprising the absolute control of the State revenues and armies, of internal legislation and foreign diplomacy. Trust so noble evoked loyal gratitude; political co-operation engendered a deeper social harmony; high responsibility preserved the haughty self-respect of a people conquered indeed but not disinherited and dishonoured in the conquest.

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This fusion of ideals, this fellowship of common rights and privileges manifested itself not only in the daily life of the nation, but evolved a new language and a new architecture which kept all the grace and grandeur of their dual descent and symbolized the sympathetic understanding and union between the children of such widely differing origins, faiths and associations.

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III

Historic veracity can make no compromises, and it must be confessed that now we come upon a new and melancholy phase of foreign domination. For the first time in the antique palimpsest of India's story under alien rule, the stability and sanctity of her Inner Life–her only safeguard in the past, her only salvation in the future–were menaced and even partially shaken and destroyed by an adventurous race from the far-north which came to expand its trade and stayed to carve an empire ; a bold and vigorous race with a glorious literature and a glorious heritage of freedom, which had always given shelter and succour to exiled martyrs of liberty from other lands.

And yet, by some profound and inexplicable enigma or irony of political psychology, the first-fruits of England's dominion over India

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were reaped in a disintegration of the national life and a decadence of the national culture.

Ungrateful and ungracious were it to deny the abundance and variety of the gifts she has bestowed for the convenience and comfort of our existence. But in the inevitable conflict with a material civilization so antagonistic to her own spiritual ideals, the historic continuity of India's age—long evolution was betrayed and broken, and her ancient landmarks were obliterated. Her marvellous arts and industries, praised in the pages of early Greek writers and Chinese travellers were ruined, and withered like mown blossoms, and with them the dignity and discipline of patient labour transmuting personality into beauty and art into daily use. Her village republics that for centuries had proved such adequate and effective centres of autonomy perished under a system of foreign government which

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was no more than a far-off abstraction and which vested the full monopoly of power, hitherto so widely and wisely distributed in a highly-paid and doubtless highly-efficient bureaucracy, usually however ignorant of the tongues and traditions, impatient of the creeds and customs and intolerant of the aims and achievements of a nation whose destinies it controlled.

A deadly policy of distrust insulted, by disarming, the manhood of that epic India of dauntless warriors whose prowess is chanted in the national ballads, whose very steeds and swords had their own heroic names and intrepid histories.

Her immemorial prestige was outraged and trampled under the heel of a young irreverent power, drunk with the pride of material conquest and possession which sought to maintain its political supremacy by an arrogant social

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aloofness from the people, and with high-handed injustice set up an illogical and arbitrary standard of colour as the only criterion of worth.

But the climax of England's unconscious wrong to India to lay in what was surely meant to be the crown of all her conscious benefactions, embodied in a system of education which, doubtless, flawless and fruitful within its own familiar province, was not merely unsuited but even inimical to the genius of our race. For, education to become the incorruptible living wealth of a nation must be self-evolved and an authentic expression of the national spirit. But this foreign education sold three generations of denationalized Indian youth into a blind intellectual bondage to the West. The old learning that had enriched, the old art that had illumined our daily life were disowned ; the old music that had invoked

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enchantment, the old religious vision that had kindled inspiration were disclaimed and forgotten. The grave and lovely ceremonials and courtesies of our social inheritance were discarded in a lamentable and futile imitation of western ways ; the beautiful Puranic and Qu'ranic names of our children were torn from them in our slavish passion for western nomenclature.

Could the degradation of a subject-race, however temporary and transient, be more sudden, more tragic, more complete ?........... to be retrieved, effaced, atoned for by the tears or the blood of her children's sorrow and repentance.

But the high gods that guard the secrets of the future hold the balance true, and the final issues are secure. By some sacred law of recompense or reparation, it is decreed that India which has reached the nadir of her

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downfall under foreign domination shall rise again swiftly and safely to the zenith of her hope by the willing aid and in the inseparable companionship of the self-same race that has wounded her honour, crushed her pride, challenged her capacity and denied to her for so long the inalienable birthright of individuals and nations liberty, the very breath of life.

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IV

Against the background of a starry silence I see the vision of the Future, not veiled in the vague glamour of a dream, but lit with the solemn glory of a revelation.

In the great Recension whose appointed hour draws near, when world-power shall be revalued and world-destinies refashioned, She stands, an India strong and free and fearless with eyes that keep the memory of æonean wisdom and hands that hold the fourfold gifts of life........an equal comrade of mighty modern nations, and queen within her own inviolate lands, administering her own high laws, controlling her own wide wealth, imparting her own rich culture, defending

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her own vast frontiers. Her old ideals are born again in a myriad-hearted multiform energy, and shine afresh in the revival of her national learning, in the renewal of her national arts, in the restoration of her manifold secular and spiritual activities, in the virile and splendid manhood of her sons, in the brave and radiant womanhood of her daughters, in the confederacy of surpassing love and service which is the united gift to her of every race of which she has been the refuge, of every faith of which she has been the sanctuary.

The Dawn of her deliverance is at hand. For imperishable are the prophecies of Time and eternal the pledges of the Soul.

The Soul of India, self-redeemed and victorious, shall become again the mystic Temple of Humanity, where the pilgrim nations of the earth may sojourn as of yore to share

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the universal invocation for that ageless peace which is the divinest flower of Life's attainment :

"Om! Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!"

HYDERABAD (DECCAN),
December, 1917.

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